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Citation for published version:

Murphy, B & Palma-Fahey, M 2018, 'Exploring the construction of the Irish Mammy in 'Mrs Brown's Boys': Making and breaking the stereotype', *Pragmatics and Society*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 297-328.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/ps.16022.mur>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1075/ps.16022.mur](https://doi.org/10.1075/ps.16022.mur)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Pragmatics and Society

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Exploring the construction of *the Irish Mammy* in ‘Mrs Brown’s Boys’: Making and breaking the stereotype

Abstract

This paper explores how the cultural concept of *the Irish Mammy* is portrayed in the popular television comedy series ‘Mrs Brown’s Boys’. Considering the historicity and cultural aspects surrounding essential views of Irishness that have shaped the archetype of the stereotype, we draw on a corpus of (semi)scripted fictional interaction taken from the series. Using a Corpus Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADA) approach to explore linguistic patterning surrounding the use of key lexical markers (e.g. *Mammy*), we investigate what they reveal about how the concept is represented, (de)constructed, and negotiated. The paper discusses the construction and deconstruction of the stereotype and the extent to which it draws on shared knowledge to reflect and navigate particular cultural values and concerns (Hall 2007; Hall et al. 2013). It views the deconstruction, in particular, as a way of challenging the traditional stereotype, in light of societal change, to provide a more layered, realistic and multi-faceted insight into the identities of *the Irish Mammy* figure within this fictional context of Mrs Brown’s Boys.

Keywords: gender, culture, Irish-English, identity, construction, deconstruction, stereotype

1 Introduction

The inter-relationship between the media, society and power has long been acknowledged and discussed (Litosseliti 2006; Karan 2008; Wodak 2012, Kidd 2016). Fairclough (2003) highlighted its role as an active force with links to the production and circulation of values and cultural meanings (Carter and Steiner 2004), while Karan (2008) added that the decisions behind what the media selects often challenges opinions of what is normal and/or acceptable in a particular social context, and, as a result, leads people to look at themselves and view the specific media genre as a mirror of their particular society (Cilliers 2008). This has been particularly prominent in the work of fictional media, and specifically in the sub-genres of soap opera and sitcom (Quaglio 2009). Soap operas, for instance, offer a fictional experience or world, engaging its audience in a narrative, which is drawn from the audience’s shared knowledge and, in turn, reflects some of the values and concerns of a particular society (Palma-Fahey 2005, 2007). Both media sub-genres have long been cited as examples of social

practices which are saturated with meanings and values and which contribute to our culturally constructed identities (Hall 2013; Gledhill and Ball 2013: 335). They provide meaning and value to people, objects and things. For instance, cultural insights come through how concepts are represented through the words we use, the stories which are told, the emotions we associate with them, how they are classified and conceptualised and the values that we place upon them (Hall et al 2013: xix). As a result, fictional media, such as soap operas and sitcoms offer somewhat of an interchange between the fiction and social world and, as a text, can be seen as semiotic sites for the production and negotiation of representations, meanings and identities (Gledhill and Ball 2013: 351). In a similar vein, television comedy series draw on events and discourses in the social world both as a source of topical story material and as a means of commanding the recognition of audiences through conformity to ‘cultural verisimilitude’, that is, what the dominant culture believes to be the case with regard to mores, norms and common sense about the social world (Hall 1997). As a result, as in the case of soap operas, they need to be ‘read’ according to cultural codes which invite ‘readers’ or, indeed, ‘viewers’, to deploy cultural competence from their lived experience in their engagement with the ‘text’ (Gledhill and Ball 2013: 374).

Taking this into account, we will explore how the cultural concept of the stereotypical *Irish Mammy* is portrayed in the popular television comedy series ‘Mrs Brown’s Boys’. Considering the historicity and cultural aspects surrounding essential views of Irishness that have shaped the archetype of *the Irish Mammy*, we draw on a 40,000 word corpus of (semi)scripted fictional interaction taken from ‘Mrs Brown’s Boys’. Using a Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach to explore the linguistic patterns surrounding the use of the key lexical markers ‘mammy’, ‘mother’ and the character herself, ‘Agnes’, we look at what they reveal about how the concept of *the Irish Mammy*

is represented, (de)constructed, and negotiated within this particular fictional and cultural context.

2 The concept of *the Irish Mammy*

Representations of *the Irish Mammy* have appeared throughout the years in literature (Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, 1996), theatre (Synge's *Ryders to the Sea*, 1904) and film (*Mrs Brown's Boys D'Movie*, 2014) where she has generally been considered a humble, pious, self-sacrificing natural born mother (Inglis 2005: 30). McLoughlin (in Inglis 2005: 16) states that, the stereotype of *the Irish Mammy* has come from the fact that, historically, Irish women were valued for having an overwhelming desire to marry, and for remaining faithful, subordinated and dependent on their husbands as well as for largely accepting the domestic sphere as their natural habitat. They adopted natural and expected roles as mothers and wives and accepted that their sexuality was confined to marriage and reproduction.

According to McLoughlin (1994), towards the end of the nineteenth century Irish women were widely involved in sexual relationships, which were curtailed by the impact of the economic factors that prevailed in Ireland at that time, and which brought changes regarding sexual and social behaviour affecting all women regardless of their class and position in society. It was at this time when prudery and chastity became greatly valued restricting the sexual freedoms that some women, especially those from lower classes, had had until then. With this development, marriage and motherhood were considered the only valid options for all women despite their socio-economic position in society. Therefore, becoming a respectable woman became essential in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century and according to McLoughlin (1994:266) this sought-after respectability was associated to the following three main characteristics:

1. Women having an overwhelming desire to marry and be faithful in a life-long union. Also their willingness to remain subordinate and dependent in that relationship.
2. Women accepting the domestic sphere as their natural arena where they engaged in reproductive and non-productive tasks.
3. Women's sexuality being totally confined to marriage.

These societal views and expectations regarding women were supported by restrictive policy initiatives in the 1920s and 1930s that curtailed freedom in issues such as contraception and divorce, and also obstructed the possibility for women to work in jury services as well as in the civil service. These policies were upheld and supported by the Constitution of 1937 (Beaumont, 1999:94) when the role of women as a mother figure and homemaker was asserted by Eamon de Valera (Irish Prime Minister) in the Irish Constitution when he stated “everyone knows there is a little chance of having a home in the real sense if there is no women in it, the woman is really the home-maker (Irish Press, 26 June 1937, cited in Beaumont, 1999:94) .

Further understanding of these traits associated with the *Irish Mammy* stereotype can be gained by considering Inglis (2005) who takes a historical view and lists five social milestones which are seen to have been influential in the construction of *the Irish Mammy* figure. They include:

- i) the impact of British Victorian attitudes to women, marriage, and family;
- ii) the effect of the population boom between 1754-1841;
- iii) the influence of the teachings of the Church;
- iv) the slow social progress and development surrounding gender equality in Ireland
- v) the role of Catholicism in Irish law.

Inglis (2005: 21) notes that practices in Victorian times in Britain infiltrated Irish society and are somewhat responsible for the foundations of the stereotype of *the Irish Mammy*. He emphasised the role of the family home as the woman's domain and as the

foundation of a civilised society where domestic bliss was central not only to one's happiness but also to one's well-being in society and where home-making was the woman's responsibility. Religious adherence also raised the social and moral status of women who did not take part in work or other social outlets, which were considered male arenas. Politics and power remained alien to women who were expected to display qualities such as piety and humility, which were appreciated and expected gender-related behaviour. He adds that women's lives included leading a life of self-sacrifice for her husband and her children with Rowbotham (1989: 52) stating that women were 'household angels' and professional managers of emotions in which restraint played a role. These attitudes to women as mothers and homemakers, Inglis (2005: 16) claimed, were adopted by tenant farmers, their wives and daughters and became entrenched in Irish life and society.

Following the population boom, however, from 2.2 to 8.2 million between 1754 and 1841, initiatives were put in place to reduce fertility and curtailing marriage was one means of doing this. This had a profound impact on Irish social and cultural life as women's expected roles as wives and mothers were no longer certain. As a result, those who were fortunate to marry had large families and high levels of marriage fertility became a dominant feature of Irish marital life with couples having up to 10, 12, and more children. This lasted well into the 20th Century and was in sharp contrast to the rest of Europe where fertility levels had begun to decline a hundred years earlier (Inglis 2005: 18). This consolidated and endorsed even further the role of the Irish matriarch in relation to the domestic domain.

Inglis (2005: 18) discusses the fact that Irish men and women saw large families as ideal which, he adds, provides some evidence for the fact that most married women, at that time, subscribed to the concept of the ideal mother which was put forward by the

Catholic Church. Contraception was not allowed under the Catholic Church, and women were very much dependent on the church for status and authority (Inglis 2005: 18). In turn, they raised their daughters with the same attitudes and values, which had been put upon them, which meant the traditional roles associated with the Irish mother, family, society and culture, and sexuality were passed on and repeated in the generations to follow.

However, while Britain moved on and Victorian attitudes and views were overtaken with the emergence of movements for women's rights, including the right to control fertility, healthier views towards sex and sexuality, as well as equality of rights between sexes, Ireland remained entrenched in the past, with Inglis (2005: 19) noting that Ireland lagged behind in attitudes to family, women, motherhood and sexuality. This further emphasised the development and entrenchment of the Irish maternal figure in Irish culture and society in comparison to the UK and the US at the time.

Changes to Irish law also impacted on the role of *the Irish Mammy* stereotype. Although women fought for independence, once this happened, the new Free State began to pass legislation that helped to confine women to the home. Condren (1995 in Inglis 2005: 20) discusses that in allowing themselves to be confined to the domestic sphere of family life and imbued with the rhetoric of self-sacrifice, by 1937, their political, economic and reproductive rights had been severely curtailed to the extent that they were barred from claiming for themselves a public identity (Valiulis 1995: 120 in Inglis 2005: 21). Their identities were in relation to the home and the church. They were wives, but of equal importance, they were mothers who had roles to play. Within these roles, self-denial was of the essence as well as the rhetoric and practice of foregoing pleasure, which since the 1950s, Inglis (2005: 21) highlights, explains why there has been a movement in Irish fictional media to portray Irish women not just as sexually

liberal and adventurous but as rebellious against the Catholic church. Hilliard (2004: 154) states that women withdrew as they became aware of having been dominated, by the Church, in some of the most intimate aspects of their lives (e.g. fertility, sexual relations, religious practice), duped by the Church whose clergy were involved in sex scandals in the 1990s, and disappointed and angered by previously respected leaders of society who they saw to be venal and dishonest. A clear shift took place in the basis of morality, as a result, and included a movement away from a pre-existing moral order propounded by the Church towards a more individualistic morality (for women) based on a greater confidence in the legitimacy of one's own experiences (Hilliard 2004: 159). By the 1970s, Inglis (2005) notes that, due to social milestones such as these, the role of women and life in Ireland had finally begun to change. Feminism began to grow steadily from the 1970s, women's movement campaigns lobbied for a change in the laws around contraception, the number of women in the labour force increased which meant that the role of the Irish woman was no longer restricted solely to motherhood. Hill (2013: 140) noted that the most dramatic changes in relation to women took place during the Celtic Tiger era between 1990-2010 which saw divorce become legalised, the first women President being elected in 1990 and the second in 1997, homosexuality decriminalised and important changes to abortion and contraception policy as well as, more recently, the introduction of same sex marriage in 2015. All of these social changes have contributed to the creation of counter-stereotypes of the *Irish Mammy* in the media, resulting often in the portrayal of sexually liberated and rebellious women, especially in Irish soap operas throughout the 70s and up to the present day. For example, *The Riordans*, set in rural Ireland (1965 and 1979), showed in the 1970s one of its well-known female characters, Maggie, deciding to take the contraceptive pill. *Glenroe* in 1997 (1983 to 2001) showed female character Fidelma kissing her cousin's

husband Miley in the hay barn (one of the main characters of the soap opera). This scene was considered, at that time, one of the most controversial sex scenes in Irish television. More recently we see in *Fair City* (1989 to present), set in Dublin, portrayals of women working outside the home and engaging in promiscuous behaviour. For example, in the late 1990s we see the wife (Sandie) of one of the male characters (Leo) sleeping with his husband's son after finding out that he was having an affair. The more controversial topic of abortion was also raised in 2001, when the character Kay, against the wishes of the father, decided to abort her pregnancy because she knew that the child would be born with severe disabilities and could die shortly after birth. These representations of women/mothers provide examples of how the media challenges the traditional stereotype raising awareness of issues regarding sexuality, gender and motherhood and have gone on to create great controversy at the time in which they were shown in Irish television.

However, while the role and representation of Irish women has naturally evolved, there still remains a hangover from years of cultural and social entrenchment which seems to have given rise to the stereotype of *the Irish Mammy*. Colm O'Regan, author of 'The Book of Irish Mammies', provides what he feels are typical insider insights into *the Irish Mammy* through quotes and typical behaviour which, he ascertains, resonate with readers and which emphasise the role of *the Irish Mammy* in the domestic sphere. For instance, he writes 'Everyone should have an Irish Mammy. She's never short of advice, a kind word and a cup of tea (making sure to scald the teapot first, of course)'. In addition, in 2014, Irish radio and television presenter Baz Ashmawy appeared in the Sky television series '50 ways to kill your Mammy' which saw him and his 72 year old Irish mother travel the world in search of adventure with the main aim of testing his conservative and reserved Irish mother's courage and nerve. Given its popularity, the

series won an Emmy Award in 2015 for Best Non-Scripted Entertainment. In 2016, he returned with yet another series which, this time, included four additional mothers from England, Scotland, Singapore and Jamaica. Despite being well-established in Irish society, McCarthy (2004: 98) notes that the stereotype of the *Irish Mammy* is not uniquely Irish and states that her defining characteristics are also shared, for instance, with the Jewish-American mother, the British Indian mother and the Italian Mamma. Rich (1976) states that one of the reasons that mothers find themselves similarly portrayed across the centuries, cultures and classes is because their representation is, in fact, the function of a trans-historical, trans-cultural social phenomenon called ‘the institution of motherhood’. She states that under the ideology of ‘the institution of motherhood’, all women are seen as mothers and expected to experience motherhood unambivalently and in accordance with patriarchal values. McCarthy (2004: 98) claims that fiction illuminates the ways in which ‘the institution of motherhood’ (Rich 1976) was structured and states that despite the ways in which the institution has shifted shape over the past 100 years, it has remained steadfastly fixed and functioning throughout. A brief exploration of O’Carroll’s portrayal of the Irish matriarch in his novel ‘The Mammy’ (1994) supports this claim as it shows a very similar outspoken and foul-mouthed character to the one portrayed 21 years later in 2015 in Mrs Brown’s Boys. The only differences lay with the kind of topics the character draws on which reflect its timestamp (e.g. social welfare and poverty in the 1990s; gay sexuality in 2015).

The shared knowledge concerning the stereotype of *the Irish Mammy* is reflected in popular culture not only in books, films and television programmes. It is also present in newspaper articles, in social media and in websites which are fully dedicated to the topic of the Irish Mammy. Moreover, it is exploited in the selling of merchandise such

as tea towels, aprons, cups and mugs, amongst others products, with printed photos or quotes from the Irish Mammy.

Exploring the concept of *the Irish Mammy* in the television series 'Mrs Brown's Boys' means investigating the concept in a genre which represents an interchange between the fictional and social/cultural world (Gledhill and Ball 2013: 351). We view this particular television series as a social force with links to the production and circulation of values and cultural meanings (Carter and Steiner 2004) which contribute to the construction of cultural identities (Gledhill and Ball 2013) and which, in turn, we feel, make it a suitable platform for investigating *the Irish Mammy* construct. While it presents a fictional world, we are particularly interested in how it draws on and uses shared knowledge surrounding the concept of *the Irish Mammy* to reflect and navigate particular cultural values and concerns related to this stereotype. Although an understanding of the construct of *the Irish Mammy* seems to exist implicitly, this paper aims to explore and uncover more explicitly, within the context of Mrs Brown's Boys, what these meanings and values are and how the construct is embedded in both cultural and social historicity, as we view this media production somewhat as a mirror of Irish society (Cilliers 2008). In this paper we use the term 'representation' according to Hall's definition of this concept, therefore as being "an essential part of the process in which meaning is produced and exchanged between the members of a culture. It involves the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things" (Hall, 1997: 15). In the same vein, we use the term 'identity' according to Hall's definition (1992), thus as a "moveable feast", which can be formed and transformed continuously according to the manner in which we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us (Hall, 1992: 277). We use the term 'stereotyping' to refer to the overgeneralization of some characteristics of a group, which are then applied to all the

members of the group. These overgeneralized characteristics are considered to have positive and negative value (Scollon and Scollon, 2001, 2nd ed.: 168). Consequently, we use the term ‘stereotype’ to refer to a stable set of beliefs or preconceived ideas that the members of a group share about the characteristics of a group of people which are widely held but often fixed and over-generalized (Barna, 1985; Online Oxford Dictionary; Guirdham 2011).

3 Data and Methodology

3.1 The corpus

In this paper, we focus on one particular data-set, *Mrs Brown’s Boys’ Corpus* (MBBC), which was taken from a larger Corpus of Irish Fictional Media (CIFM). The popular television series stars and was created by Irish writer and performer Brendan O’Carroll, who plays the leading role of ‘the Mammy’, Mrs Agnes Brown, who O’Carroll originally played, in the 1990s, in stage plays, on radio, and more recently in 2014 in film. The character also appeared in books entitled *The Mammy* (O’Carroll 1994), *The Chisellers* (O’Carroll 1995), *The Granny* (O’Carroll 1996), and *The Young Wan* (O’Carroll 2003), which were first published in Ireland, before being made available in the United Kingdom. The show centres around the character, Mrs Brown who is a vivacious, loud and foul-mouthed, widowed Irish matriarch who cares for her grown-up family following the death of her husband and who takes an active interest in theirs and other people’s lives. Her main role is as the Irish mother and she is addressed and referred to mainly by her children, and others throughout, as ‘Mammy’. The character, played by a man (Brendan O’Carroll) dressed as a middle aged old fashioned Irish house-wife, is drawn from the shared knowledge that the writer, scriptwriter and Irish audience have of the concept of the stereotypical Irish Mammy. The character taps into

the traditional features usually associated with *the Irish Mammy* stereotype and presents herself as the matriarch of the household. Her leading role and importance are reflected in the title of the show and are also emphasised by the fact that she begins and ends the show with a personal monologue and concluding address. In addition to Mrs Brown, the show stars her adult children: sons Mark, Rory, Dermot and Trevor and her only daughter, Cathy as well as her best friend Winnie, and other minor characters. It is worth highlighting that the cast are close family members in real-life, for example, Cathy who plays Mrs Brown's daughter is, in fact, Mrs Brown's wife in reality. This close relationship adds another layer to the contextual background of the data (see also Beacom 2013). These particular aspects of the show make it difficult to categorise 'Mrs Brown's Boys' under a specific media genre. While it shares many commonalities with the genre of sitcoms including a continuing cast of characters and a sequence of episodes, it also presents features related to the genre of soap opera as it, firstly, draws on the audience's shared knowledge of the stereotype and secondly, seeks to engage the audience, through humour, by including direct messages and subtle, nuanced meanings which convey an appreciation of the main traditional traits associated to the stereotype. This fuzziness in terms of its categorisations makes it an interesting context to explore as it breaks the mould by positioning itself in a new and emergent genre of its own.

Since 2011, *Mrs Brown's Boys* has become increasingly popular in Ireland and the UK, as well as more recently in Canada and Australia. The show, which is recorded at BBC Glasgow in front of a live audience, adopts an informal production style where mistakes and tomfoolery are left unedited, ad-libbing is common and where much of the humour is provided by and centres around Mrs Brown. In 2011, O'Carroll was quoted as saying 'I love the lines that are not in the script' which reflects his attitude and approach to the

show. He added that as well as being the writer and playing the lead role, the producer allows him to have an opinion on the overall look and feel of the show. He also emphasized the importance of the television series being filmed in front of a live audience as it allows them to keep it as close to a stage show as possible and stated that both himself and the actors rely on the live audience for the rhythm of their performances. He adds that while he always writes alone, he has a very gifted script-writer who has helped him to gain experience and expertise. He is also fortunate, he states, to generate jokes and good lines during the performance which his producers allow him to keep in the show. He adds that while Mrs Brown is not necessarily based on his mother, she is informed somewhat by his mother's traits and life in Ireland during her adult life. He states that although Mrs Brown is uneducated, his own mother was extraordinary as she began her adult life as a nun with a Bachelor of Arts Degree, but later left the order and went on to have 11 children (2011 online, BBC).

The corpus, drawn on in this study, amounts to approximately 40,000 words, including six full episodes, which were taken from series one, which was broadcast in 2012, the year it won three comedy awards. While the corpus is small at only 40,000 words, it is nevertheless useful in providing a snapshot into a very particular and specialised genre in terms of gender/cultural representation. O'Keeffe et al (2007: 198) states that small specialised corpora, such as this one, do not need to be as large as more general corpora to yield reliable results, while Koester (2010) adds that many of the limitations of such a corpus, which emerge naturally, can be counterbalanced by reference to the context which provides useful contextual clues and background data, which, in turn, can lead to more meaningful and nuanced accounts.

3.2 *Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies*

In this study, the corpus will be explored using a Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) approach. CADS is ‘a nascent disciple’ (Partington 2008: 96) which applies corpus linguistics in discourse analysis. Baker (2010) notes that it is an approach which is used either on its own or in support of other forms of discourse analysis. The combination of corpus linguistics and (critical) discourse analysis provides the researcher with two potential starting points. Firstly, the analysis may start from the corpus making use of corpus software such as WordSmith Tools (Scott 2012) to access the data and identify areas for further exploration, as may occur, for instance, in an analysis which is driven by a keyword comparison (Culpeper 2009). Secondly, the analysis may start with a discourse analytic frame and collect corpus data, which is then interpreted and categorised through that frame (Mulderigg 2011). In this study, the first approach, which centres the starting point around corpus-based tools and methodologies, is adopted. The study begins by taking key lexical markers (i.e. words in this case) identified in keyword analyses as its focus and uses WordSmith Tools to explore them further by generating quantitative and qualitative insights into the data (Baker 2010) and carrying out a more discourse analysis exploration on the longer extracts in order to deconstruct the social and cultural concept of *the Irish Mammy* as represented in the data.

Our investigation began with a keyword comparison, which compared the small specialised MBBC with the larger one million word Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE) ¹. Initially, the top keywords in MBBC showed only the occurrence of the main characters as seen in Table 1. *Agnes* (Mrs Brown’s) role as the main character in the television series is obvious as she appears at the top of the list and occurs considerably

¹ LCIE is a one-million-word spoken corpus of mostly casual conversations, created under the direction of Dr Fiona Farr, University of Limerick and Dr Anne O’Keeffe, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland

more frequently than the others at 1, 657 times. Excluding the characters from the list, however, provides more insight into Agnes' place in the television series as her role as a married woman (*Mrs*), a mother (*Mammy*), her relationship with her children (*son*, *love*, their life events e.g. *wedding*), as well as her association with the domestic domain (*kitchen*, *cupboard*) become apparent (see Table 1). In this paper, we will focus predominantly on Mrs Brown's role as a mother.

INSERT TABLE 1

While the typical Irish English form *Mammy* is the most frequently used reference to Agnes as a mother in the MBBC and is used solely by Agnes' children to address her and to speak about her, we also found a number of other forms which are listed in Table 2, although they are used less frequently. For example, *Mother* occurs 26 times but is never used by her children, although it is used by Mrs Brown, on 8 occasions, to refer to her own role as a mother. It is also used to refer to other characters' mothers (e.g. *Maria's mother*). *Ma* occurs 25 times. However, it is only used by the children to refer to their mother, Mrs Brown, 8 times and is, therefore, not discussed in this study.

INSERT TABLE 2

In this paper, we focus on the top forms, *Mammy*, *Mother*, and *Agnes* and use them to carry out a CADS analysis. In the analysis, concordance lines were examined thoroughly and coded. Coding involved looking at text data through concordance lines and extracts and labelling each use of the keywords in order to generate insights into the stereotype (e.g. *Mammy* as 'carer', 'critic', 'culturally ignorant', 'irreverent' etc). On completion, the lists from each author were compared and contrasted and a final list which involved grouping the codes according to the most salient macro (e.g. construction and deconstruction of the stereotype) and micro ('love', 'control and interference' etc), themes emerging from the data. These were then used to provide

structure for the discussion below (see Section 4). Examples where ‘Mammy’ was used in salutations (e.g. ‘Hi Mammy’/’Bye Mammy’) or in stage directions were excluded. Figure 1 shows a sample of concordance lines which were examined as part of this study.

INSERT FIGURE 1

This approach to examining the data is useful as it allows one to uncover non-obvious meaning, particularly cultural insights, which might not be readily available to the naked eye (Partington 2008). Partington (2008) adds that much of what carries meaning in texts is not open to direct observation and therefore through combining a quantitative corpus approach with a more qualitative focus, it may well be possible to better understand the processes at play in the discourse type. Stubbs (1996: 194) also argues that these methods are more likely to document discursive patterns that might be less visible using other, intuitive methods. He states that such an approach can reveal ‘the reproduction of dominant discourse, in which particular definitions and classifications acquire, by repetition, an aura of common sense, and come to seem natural and comprehensive rather than partial and selective.’ In a similar vein, Caldas-Coulthard and Moon (2010: 100) put forward that corpus studies can help deconstruct hidden meanings and the asymmetrical ways people are represented, in particular, in relation to the ‘asymmetries’ in the linguistic representation of gender (see also Aull and Brown 2013).

4 Analysis: making and breaking *the Irish Mammy* stereotype

Having investigated, coded and grouped all instances of *Mammy*, *Mother* and *Agnes* (where she functions in or refers to her mothering role), it became apparent that the representation of *the Irish Mammy*, in Mrs Brown’s Boys, seemed to pivot around 5

main micro themes: (i) love (ii) control and interference (iii) sex (iv) sexual orientation and (v) culture. In each of these themes, we notice, two macro themes emerging, on the one hand, the construction of *the Irish Mammy* stereotype, which clearly draws on traits, which have been typically associated with the construct, albeit in an exaggerated and over-emphasised way. On the other hand, however, we see the deconstruction of the stereotype, which comes from, very obviously, breaking the expectations surrounding the assumptions traditionally associated with it. This dual approach, i.e. the juxtaposition of ‘making’ and ‘breaking’ the stereotype gives rise to the negotiation and re-negotiation of *the Irish Mammy* construct which results in a nod to cultural and social historicity while, at the same time, shatters traditionally accepted boundaries, assumptions and traits which have been central to characterising the stereotype. This pattern also appears to be revelatory in terms of defining and re-defining the concept of *the Irish Mammy* when viewed within this current context. In this section, we will refer to each of the salient themes and discuss what they reveal in terms of the representation of the Irish maternal archetype when viewed through this modern lens.

4.1 Love

One of the predominant themes, which characterises the role of the Irish matriarch throughout the data, is the love she has for her children. In Mrs Brown’s Boys, *the Irish Mammy* is both defined and re-defined in relation to this theme. On the one hand, she is portrayed as a caring, loyal and loving mother who looks after her children which is in line with traditional expectations and her role as the stereotypical home-maker as outlined by Inglis (2002, 2005). Insights into this aspect of her role as a mother can be seen in the last line of Extract 1 where she negotiates her idea of what it is to be a mother asserting that it is about loving her children and being there for them when they need her.

Extract 1

1. Cathy: Thank you Mammy.
2. Agnes: You're welcome!
3. Cathy: I mean it... Mammy - really...thank you.
4. Agnes: I know you do. That ...that's what we do lovemothers...that's what we do

On the other hand, Mrs Brown is also portrayed as being emotionally repressed which is in line with the traditional stereotype. As highlighted by Rowbotham (1989), the traditional maternal figure was a manager of emotions, and someone who was uneasy with open demonstrative displays of affection. This is reflected by Mrs Brown in Extract 2 where she refers to the affectionate embrace by her daughter as 'shit' implying that it makes her feel uncomfortable and she vows to 'toughen' her daughter up. While this may be said in jest and as a way of masquerading her discomfort, it, nonetheless, provides some insights into the old world Mrs Brown has lived in where emotions were kept hidden and not displayed (Inglis 2005). It is also an example of how O'Carroll constructs the stereotype by drawing on comedic devices, such as 'comedic relief' (see Westwood 2004). In this case, he creates a humorous situation in order to relieve emotional tension by juxtaposing softness, shown by Cathy, with rejection demonstrated by Agnes to both create and diffuse the moment.

Extract 2

1. Cathy: Come here Mammy!
2. Agnes: Oh, don't start that shit now! CATHY HUGS HER – WHILE IN THE HUG...
3. AGNES: I'm going to feckin toughen you up

This side to Mrs Brown's character is illustrated further in Extract 3, which shows her belittling a very overt declaration of love for her son by saying that she had read it on a card and thus making clear that it was not her own composition which sees her distancing herself from its sentiments and its emotional nature. In a way, O'Carroll is using mockery here as a comedic device as he shows Agnes pretending to be overtly

sentimental with her son. This is juxtaposed against the reality of the situation which is an absence of verbally demonstrative love that is synonymous with the stereotype of the Irish Mammy (as illustrated in Extract 2).

Extract 3

1. Agnes: ... And whatever you are. I want you to know that I will ALWAYS be your mother.

RORY SMILES

2. Agnes: And I want you to know that it doesn't matter how far we are apart, or long we are apart, I will always be here waiting - with a loving heart

RORY IS TOUCHED

3. Cathy: Ahhhhh!

4. Agnes: It is nice isn't it?

CATHY NODS

5. Agnes: I read it on a card!

CATHY ROLLS HER EYES

However, while Mrs Brown shows discomfort with overt affection, it is clear that her love for her children knows no bounds, as illustrated in Extract 4. In this extract, Mrs Brown's friend, Winnie, negatively comments on what Agnes' daughter, Cathy, is wearing at a social event they are attending together. Agnes immediately responds to Winnie in a threatening way implying violent behaviour.

Extract 4

1. Winnie: At least he's wearing more than Cathy!

AGNES SNAPS A LOOK AT WINNIE

2. Agnes: Careful now Winnie you could end up having a meal through a tube in a bed beside Jacko.

While, on the one hand, Agnes' confrontational attitude is an exaggerated effort to safeguard her daughter's reputation, on the other hand, this effort deconstructs the typical stereotype of the traditional Mammy who was seen to be non-confrontational (Inglis 2002, 2005) and a repository of society's ideals (McCarthy 2004: 97). As a result, the juxtaposition between these two facets to the character provide comedic value as expected traditional cultural traits are violated in favour of counter-stereotypical images. This side to Mrs Brown's character is frequently drawn upon

throughout the television series as she is often portrayed in a much darker way through sarcasm, inappropriateness, rudeness, as well as foulmouthed and outspoken comments (see Figure 3). In portraying her in this way, we see the deconstruction of the traditional construct and the appearance of a much darker side to the maternal figure which may be reflective of her social background and standing. O'Carroll locates Mrs Brown in Dublin's inner city which is not only known for its poverty, high levels of unemployment, and social struggles, which are often visible through the character's use of taboo language and hostile approach, but also for its close communities and community spirit.

INSERT FIGURE 2

These extracts appear to reveal that Mrs Brown's identity is more multi-faceted than what is expected from the traditional stereotype. While she is constructed as a kind and loving mother, who is uncomfortable with overt displays of affection, she is deconstructed as a foul-mouthed matriarch, who is harsh, insensitive and sarcastic. Her character is flawed and imperfect and she sends up to ridicule the construct of a humble and pious nature (Inglis 2002, 2005). The counter-stereotypical images she portrays means that she displays more depth and complexity than the traditional stereotype, which is thought to be simple and uncomplicated in nature. The harsher side shatters the traditional image but, at the same time, also flags up possible justification for her behaviour when we consider the difficult and limiting times she grew up in and the lack of emotional attention which was common at that time in an Irish cultural setting (Inglis 2005). In *Mrs Brown's Boys*, Agnes is both mother and father to her family and this may also be responsible for triggering the harder side to her nature as she undertakes two parental roles and manages a family on her own. The fact that Mrs Brown is also

played by a man may impact on this as well as the fact that the programme is set in Dublin and purports to reflect, as mentioned earlier, an inner city identity, which may be seen to include harsher types of interaction and confrontation. From these examples, we highlight the role that fiction plays in providing insights into the different ways patriarchy intersects with diverse identifiers (adapted, McCarthy 2004: 98) such as class (e.g. working class), gender (e.g. female), role (e.g. mother) age (e.g. middle aged) and geographical location (e.g. inner city Dublin). In *Mrs Brown's Boys*, as we have seen so far and will see again below, cultural patterns around the character are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society (e.g. gender, class etc.). The stereotype, as a result, is both informed in its construction and deconstruction by the interrelatedness of these identifiers which combine to challenge the traditional stereotype and provide a more nuanced and multi-layered account of *the Irish Mammy* represented in *Mrs Brown's Boys*. When questioned, O'Carroll says she's informed by many, to some extent by his mother but also, for example, 'the tough, feisty women I helped out as a kid in the fruit and veg market in Dublin's Moore Street (Inner city).

In any case, the juxtaposition of her more confrontational nature against the traditional socio-cultural background is unexpected and breaks with the traditional view of the stereotype, which serves to shock the audience and provide comedic value as well as question and challenge the nature of *the Irish Mammy* stereotype. The themes, which follow, attempt to explore further how the stereotype is being questioned and what it means.

4.2 *Control and interference*

The portrayal of the Irish matriarch continues in relation to the theme of control and interference and following the pattern of construction versus deconstruction. Mrs Brown is constructed largely within the realms of the traditional stereotype which shows her to be a manager of her domestic domain, fully responsible for her children and their well-being (Inglis 2002, 2005), a professional manager of emotions (Rowbotham 1989) and central to securing domestic bliss for her family (Inglis 2005). As a result, these roles are reflected in her constant need to help her children, even as adults, and her inability to relinquish control, which both shapes her identity as the stereotypical mother (see Figure 3) but also tests her relationship with her adult children as they attempt to prevent her interference.

INSERT FIGURE 3

While Extract 5 shows Mrs Brown's continued attempts at securing happiness for her children (line 1), we also see insights into the deconstruction of the stereotype. Uncharacteristically, lines 3 and 4 show Mrs Brown's unwavering desire to be a leader, which goes against expected assumptions around the construct as, traditionally, in Ireland, women were dependent on the church for status and authority and did not seek authority or leadership (Inglis 2002, 2005). Raising their daughters in the same traditional way meant that roles associated with the mother, family, society and culture were repeated through the generations. Here, through these examples of counter-stereotype, we see a break from tradition as Mrs Brown strives to take a centre stage, albeit within her domestic arena. She likens her role, inaccurately and inappropriately, to leaders in the Middle East and her lack of world knowledge and education is reinforced as she mispronounces and, consequently, adapts his name, for humorous effect.. Mrs Brown's desire for leadership may well be inspired by O'Carroll's own mother Maureen who not only became the first female to be elected as an Irish Labour

Party MP in 1954 but who worked tirelessly as an activist and fought to have the law which prevented women working as civil servants overturned in the 1950s. She also introduced Ireland's 'Short Birth Certificate' which allowed illegitimate' to be replaced by the less judgemental 'Father undeclared' (Radio Times: online).

Extract 5

1. Agnes: Cathy, there has to be something I can do about Dermot and Maria.
2. Cathy: Mammy as I said, we all need to just butt out.
3. Agnes: I want to be involved - I want to be a leader Cathy. I want to be like your man in Iran – 'Mock-Mood-Mohammed-Jibbidi-Get-It-Back-Up Again'
4. Cathy: Mammy of all people you stay out of this. I mean it.
5. Cathy: Promise me you won't interfere
6. Agnes: Exactly!
7. Dermot: Mammy, I wish you'd stay out of things for once and mind your own business

These interactions provide insights into the development of *the Irish Mammy* identity and how the television series seems to challenge the traditional construct by presenting counter-stereotypes and a more multi-faceted view of *the Irish Mammy*, who is feisty and confident in putting herself forward, which holds up the stereotype for commentary and debate when viewed as a reflection of societal and cultural change in Ireland. This portrayal draws on cultural changes from Feminism in the 1970s, which changed the role of women in Ireland widening their remit and no longer confining them solely to motherhood roles, to the most dramatic changes during the Celtic Tiger period (as discussed earlier). The portrayal of Mrs Brown as a product of two eras holds up the stereotype for re-negotiation against a changing socio-cultural backdrop and her desire for leadership appears to be a part of this new-found cultural and social liberation.

4.3 Sex

In this section, we see further insights into how the stereotype of the Irish Mammy is being challenged in relation to how she is portrayed with regard to sex. Traditionally,

Ireland lagged behind Britain and the US in terms of their views on sex, sexuality, motherhood and family (Inglis 2002, 2005) and this background informs the construct of the traditional *Irish Mammy* figure. Inglis (2005: 20) writes that, traditionally, sex was seen in relation to reproduction and that women, whose roles were within the home and the Church, lived lives imbued with the rhetoric of self-sacrifice and self-denial and the absence of pleasure. As highlighted by Hilliard (2004: 140), the Church had control over issues of individual sexuality, which limited women, and this was deeply rooted in a perception of the embodiment of the power of the priest at that time. In Mrs Brown's Boys, we see reflections of this cultural historicity as Mrs Brown is portrayed, within the traditional expectations of the stereotype, and in Extract 6 is shown to be suspicious of men's sexual desires.

Extract 6

1. Cathy: Will you stop, Mammy, not all men are sex maniacs
2. Agnes: Yes they are
3. Winnie: Yes they are

However, it is also against this background that we notice the deconstruction of the Irish maternal stereotype. In Extract 7, Mrs Brown is portrayed as appearing to drink too much, joke about having casual sex with strangers (line 4) and when questioned in line 5 by her friend Betty, Mrs Brown defines sex in terms of bondage practices implying her sexually adventurous nature. In this light, she is the antithesis of the humble, pious, reserved, sexually repressed and traditional *Irish Mammy* stereotype (Inglis 2002:18). The juxtaposition of the stereotype and the counter-stereotype provides humour when viewed against the traditional cultural backdrop, outlined above, as expectations and assumptions are shattered and the construct is re-negotiated and presented.

Extract 7

1. Cathy: I really enjoyed those few drinks we had last night
2. Agnes: You had enough of them
3. Cathy: One more vodka and I'd have been under the table
4. Agnes: One more pint of cider and I'd have been under that bookin barman
5. Betty: You wouldn't would you Mrs Brown?
6. Agnes: Don't be ridiculous Betty. It's so long since I had sex I can't remember who it is that gets tied up

Further insights into the deconstruction of the traditional stereotype which involve explicit sexual innuendo and liberation, on Mrs Brown's part, serve also to challenge the traditional *Irish Mammy* stereotype. Extract 8 presents Mrs Brown's misunderstanding of the meaning of 'Grand Prix' showing her mispronounce 'Prix' as 'pricks'. The malapropism provides a deliberate effort by O'Carroll to confuse two words which have the potential to sound the same in order to suggest that Mrs Brown had intended to watch a very different kind of programme. This misunderstanding is used by the writers to draw on traditional assumptions that the typical Irish mother figure was not only uneducated, but also had an interest in sex (Inglis 2002).

Extract 8

Agnes: I sat up till after midnight waiting to see that thing to start on the feckin' telly Grand Prix. DISAPPOINTED Wasted my time – it was all about feckin' racing cars!

Extract 9 shows another example of the deconstruction of *the Irish Mammy* as it portrays her liberal nature in relation to sex. The extract shows a conversation between Mrs Brown and her daughter following their participation in a hen party the previous night. Traditionally the Irish maternal figure would not have attended such events and would have socialised in safe environments, in a more reserved manner, and usually at events to do with the Church (Inglis 2005). In this extract, we see Mrs Brown at ease and comfortable as she jokes about the paraphernalia she encountered at the party, uses taboo forms such as 'dick' and 'pricks' appearing carefree and less bound by domestic duties and religious barriers. The overt use of taboo forms in lines 3 and 5 serve to

shock the audience and provide comedic value when viewed against a traditional sociocultural background.

Extract 9

1. Cathy: Well would you look who's talking! You were as bad yourself!
2. AGNES LAUGHS
3. Agnes: I was wasn't I! Here, I left me dick in the taxi!
4. Cathy: Oh, no! CATHY LAUGHS
5. Agnes: There's a taxi going round in Dublin somewhere right now with two pricks in it!
6. CATHY LAUGHS

The deconstruction of the stereotype, through counter-stereotypical images, across these extracts shows how the concept is being re-defined and re-negotiated in Mrs Brown's Boys. Mrs Brown belongs to the old world, which has informed who she is, but she is also, very clearly, being re-positioned within the new world. Her new world is at odds with the old but her portrayal in it is reflective of a more liberal Irish cultural and social environment, as discussed above. The deconstruction of *the Irish Mammy* challenges the stereotype, albeit in a highly exaggerated way, as she shakes off the shackles of a more restrained past. Presenting Mrs Brown in this way, by juxtaposing extremes, which are at odds with traditional assumptions, serves to highlight the transformation of the stereotype in line with cultural and societal changes and send up, to some extent, in an over-emphasised way, old notions of domestic imprisonment and sexual curtailment.

4.4 Sexual orientation

The re-definition of *the Irish Mammy* continues and in this theme centres around the issue of sexual orientation, which features quite heavily in the data and draws on links to cultural and social historicity, pointing to a time in Ireland's past when homosexuality went unrecognised due to its illegal status (Inglis 2005). Extract 10 plays

to this as it shows Mrs Brown's lack of awareness of the fact that her adult son, Rory, is gay. In Extract 10, Rory's sister, Cathy, unsuccessfully discusses the topic of her brother's sexuality, on his behalf, with their mother. Cathy's attempt, which is grounded in implicature, fails to make the situation clear, as seen in line 5, and she hopelessly abandons the conversation in line 9. In the extract, Mrs Brown is shown to be operating within strict traditional social boundaries, which do not appear to take into account any other partner combinations other than male-female as she fails to notice or understand why her son may not be attending a family wedding with a female partner.

Extract 10

1. Agnes: He's in a feckin' hurry!
2. Cathy: Mammy, Rory is not bringing a girl to the wedding.
3. Agnes: Why not?
4. Cathy: ... You and Rory need to talk – he's not into women.
5. Agnes: What are you saying?...
6. Cathy: Rory is a friend of Dorothy's.
7. Agnes: Well, can't he bring Dorothy to the wedding then? Wouldn't that be alright?
8. CATHY GIVES UP
9. Cathy: I have to go ... Mammy, we'll talk later.

In the next extract, we see Rory, unsuccessfully, approach his mother directly to discuss his sexuality. In line 1, Rory checks if his mother has a moment to speak to him, signalling, to her, that he has something important to talk about. In a bid to lessen the potential shock it may provoke in his mother and easing her in the direction of his own train of thought, Rory asks his mother to guess why she thought he never wanted to play football. He appears to be protective of his mother and the sensitive nature of what he is about to reveal. He also seems to suspect that she may not receive the news well, which again is reflective of traditional assumptions around Mrs Brown's social and cultural past. While one is tricked into believing that she has understood in lines 6-8, the stereotype surrounding her lack of awareness regarding sexuality is reinforced in line 10 when it becomes clear that she has misunderstood once again when she makes

an insensitive remark. O'Carroll draws on the face-threatening nature of the inappropriate remark as well as taboo language for comedic effect. This extract deals with gay sexuality and serves to provide a glimpse into the old world to which Mrs Brown still belongs and which may be blamed, to some extent, for her lack of worldliness and lack of social awareness around issues such as homosexuality.

Extract 11

1. Rory: Have you got a minute Mammy?
2. Agnes: Yes all the time in the world for you chicken honey – what is it love?
3. Rory: Well. Mammy did you ever wonder WHY I never wanted to play for Mark's football team?
5. AGNES GOES SAD
6. Agnes: I know why love
7. Rory: (delighted) You do?
8. Agnes: I've known for years, I just couldn't say anything to you
9. RORY IS RELIEVED
- 10 Agnes: ... you're shite!²

Mrs Brown's lack of understanding surrounding homosexuality is further alluded to in Extract 12. Here she shows confusion and inaccuracy regarding which terms to use (lines 1 and 5). The extract flags up some awareness but clearly shows she is lacking in understanding as both she and her friend Winnie use archaic and socially insensitive terms such as 'homo' (line 2) and 'queer' (line 5). These terms serve to shock the audience as they are socially taboo and inappropriate but also at odds with what is expected from the stereotypical *Irish Mammy*. The extract, which centres around misunderstanding and inaccurate information, also draws on the assumption that *the Irish Mammy* was uneducated, although O'Carroll's mother, as highlighted earlier, was

² As a side note, it is worth noting that there is also an undercurrent, in this extract, which shows Mrs Brown being constructed as a caring mother which plays to the traditional image (lines 2, 6, 8) but which is cruelly deconstructed in line 10 through the harsh bald comment 'you're shite', which is face-threatening and adds odds with the image of the loving stereotypical *Irish Mammy*. This statement very obviously breaks the mould and stereotype of the caring maternal figure and provides comedic value as opposing traits are juxtaposed and in doing so deliberately sends up assumptions surrounding the *Irish Mammy* when viewed against a social and cultural background.

one of the exceptions of her generation as she was university educated and got elected into a political party where she fought for social justice in the 1950s at a time when women were usually home-bound. Inglis (2005) outlines that generally women in the 1950s in Ireland did not work or take part in social outlets as they were considered male arenas. They generally did not travel and their main roles were as homemakers based within their own domestic environments. As such, this unexpected linguistic behaviour provides humorous value when viewed against this cultural background. The extract provides interesting insights into the character of Mrs Brown as it shows her move towards acknowledging and discussing homosexuality, which is at odd with the historical cultural practices she would have been used to, as well as a willingness to educate herself by reading around the subject.

Extract 12

1. Agnes: He must be a lesbian too!
2. Winnie: Mick is a homo?
3. Agnes: Winnie – the book³ says you're not allowed to say that – it's not politically correct.
4. Winnie: Oh what do you say?
5. Agnes: I dunno, queer I think

These three extracts show the construction of the traditional *Irish Mammy* stereotype in relation to her lack of awareness and understanding of homosexuality. They draw on shared knowledge, which is linked to historical insights into the nature of society and culture of which Mrs Brown's identity is a product. Their blatant lack of understanding around these issues shows that Mrs Brown's identity appears to go between two worlds: the one of old where traditional values around the lack of recognition surrounding homosexuality were upheld and the new world where homosexuality is accepted and discussed more openly. The collision between these worlds shows how *the Irish*

³ This refers to a book on homosexuality which Mrs Brown received in the hope that she would understand Rory's situation

Mammy seems to own more traditional views but also seems to be attempting to adapt to major societal changes. It is worth noting that at the time the programme was aired, Ireland was moving towards the legalisation of same-sex marriage, which was passed in 2015. Therefore the issue of homosexuality, in *Mrs Brown's Boys*, reflects struggles and developments in Irish society as two eras, which Mrs Brown belongs to, co-exist: one which regarded homosexuality as illegal and one which saw it reach legal status. Extract 12 draws on this background and highlights the challenge faced by Mrs Brown who belongs to these two points in time.

The portrayal of the traditional *Irish Mammy* against this sociocultural background, when viewed through a more modern socio-cultural lens, suggests that the perception of *the Irish Mammy* stereotype is being challenged, through counter-stereotypes, and she is being presented as a character who is more multifaceted than the simple traditional stereotype suggests. This can be seen, more clearly, in Extract 13, which shows Mrs Brown finally discussing Rory's sexuality. In this extract, Mrs Brown indirectly asks Rory if he is gay. In a comedic display, she asks him to consider this and suggests that it may come as a shock to him, implying that he may not know, which serves to illustrate that some lack of understanding still remains. However, Rory plays along with his mother, pleased that she has finally understood, and pretends that he is going to read the book she has given him. Cathy congratulates her mother.

Extract 13

1. Agnes: Rory – what I am trying to say is have you ever considered that you might be – homo-sex-ual?
2. RORY LOOKS DOWN AND BACK UP AT AGNES
3. Agnes: Now I know it might come as a bit of a shock – and you probably want to think about it but here is a book
4. PRODUCES THE BOOK AND THRUSTS IT INTO RORY’S FACE
5. Here! Read that and it will explain everything except why Cathy hasn’t got a steady boyfriend even though she’s not lesbian or gay
6. Cathy: Mammy!
7. Agnes: Sorry.
8. RORY LOOKS PLEASED AND PATS THE BOOK
9. Rory: Thanks Mammy
10. HE RISES AND THEY HUG
11. Agnes: Oh you’re hurting Mammy now
12. Rory: OK I’d better go and read
13. Agnes: Do love. RORY LEAVES TO GO UPSTAIRS
14. Cathy: Well, Mammy, I thought you’d handled that very well
15. Agnes: It wasn’t easy it was difficult. I hope Rory never has to have that talk with any of his own children.

Through this interaction, we gain insights into the evolving nature of *the Irish Mammy* identity as presented in the data. She is portrayed as acknowledging and accepting homosexuality, and discussing it openly which appears to mark her transition from the older world where she lacked awareness to the newer one which shows her adapting to new changes in her context. Mrs Brown’s awareness and willingness to discuss homosexuality shows the deconstruction of some of the boundaries surrounding the traditional stereotype, and it is through this deconstruction that we gain insights into her evolution as she shows more developed aspects to her identity. She is being presented as an embodiment of cultural and societal change, which resonates with viewers. Her re-definition against the backdrop of a more modern Irish cultural context reflects both an evolution of the stereotype but also mirrors significant societal changes in Ireland which were confirmed in 2015 when Ireland became the first country to legalise same sex marriage by popular vote. However, the final lines of the extract (lines 15) provide some comedic value as having been portrayed as finally understanding and reaching

the same space as her son, Mrs Brown implies that some fuzziness remains surrounding her full understanding of the topic as she implies Rory will have children, with, one must assume, a female partner, which suggests that, despite all, some links to her old world still remain.

4.5 Culture

The (re)-definition of *the Irish Mammy* stereotype draws also on the theme of culture both in terms of construction and deconstruction. Agnes' character plays to the stereotype as she is shown to lack education and experience of the world which draws on the fact that, traditionally, she was confined to the domain of the home and did not travel or interact outside of her immediate local environment. Extract 14, for instance, illustrates this as it shows her lack of cultural knowledge as she is seen to misunderstand the meaning of 'mormons' while in Extract 15 she finds it difficult to accept the concept of cold soup ('gazpacho'), and Extract 16 illustrates her lack of knowledge regarding geography.

Extract 14

1. Elder Peach: No Mam! We're Mormons.
2. Agnes: (sympathetically) Oh son - don't go putting yourself down. They used to say that about my child in school but he turned out fine.

Extract 15

1. Agnes: Hers is fuckin' cold! It's cold Rory!
2. Rory: Mammy - it's gazpacho – it's supposed to be cold.
3. Agnes: Oh, don't be feekin' ridiculous – COLD SOUP

Extract 16

Agnes: It was Father Quinn who helped my son Trevor when he wanted to go away on the missions SHOWS THE PICTURE TO THE CAMERA He's in Africa now. Oh, the Chinese love him!

Another example, which plays to the construction of the traditional stereotype and her lack of education, shows Mrs Brown referring to a 'VDV player' instead of a 'DVD

player'. This example is interesting as in Brendan O'Carroll's autobiography, he states 'This book is dedicated to all the mummies out there who make sure their kids are okay. Especially my own, Florence, who, although she can't still operate a DVD player, manages to perform miracles every single day'. This particular example shows how his own life has influenced the character of Mrs Brown and how he has drawn, to some extent, on his own mother in the characterisation of the Irish maternal figure.

Extract 17

1. Agnes: Oh nice! A VDV player? How can you afford things like that Buster?
2. Buster: I know a fella ...

These examples play to the construction of the typical assumptions surrounding *the Irish Mammy* and are insights into the old world of the maternal figure whose identity is shaped by a time which was defined by a lack of travel, and technology, and when Ireland could have been considered to be mono-cultural. The extracts once again make a statement about the two worlds which *the Irish Mammy* belongs to and which we have seen exist side by side throughout this article, and the collision which is set up to show how she adapts and is evolving to a changing sociocultural context. Her lack of culture, education and travel experience is juxtaposed against assumptions of widespread travel, education and contact with diverse cultures which are now considered the norm in multicultural Ireland.

The stereotype of *the Irish Mammy*, however, is also deconstructed with regard to religious culture, within the theme, which hints at a societal shift in Ireland in relation to the role of the Church. While it was customary that Catholic priests and clergy were revered and respected, and had a central authoritative role in the community, Mrs Brown, in a scene with Father Quinn, challenges that view. She belittles the role of Catholicism in lines 8-9 and uses taboo language when speaking to the priest in line 10. All hierarchy is abandoned and roles are reversed as Agnes takes on the role of religious

adviser to a priest who is struggling with his own problems. The extract emphasises the powerlessness of the Church in comparison to earlier periods in Ireland and Mrs Brown is shown to treat Father Quinn as she would one of her children chastising him for using taboo language in line 10 when, in fact, she had used the taboo form in the first instance. Again what this example reflects is the collision, we have illustrated throughout, of both the old and new worlds of which Mrs Brown is a product. The deconstruction shows insights into the evolution of *the Irish Mammy* stereotype in relation to the Church which illustrates somewhat of a religious liberation, on Mrs Brown's part, which shows that she is no longer beholden to the clergy for status and power. She seems to have a lack of concern for Catholicism (line 8), although her belief in God, it appears, still remains (line 6). The fact that Father Quinn is shown to be struggling with his own issues also humanises this religious figure and perhaps reflects religious issues, relating to scandals, which have been made public in Ireland over the past decade. In any case, the deconstruction of *the Irish Mammy's* attitude to religion clearly challenges the traditional stereotype and marks her transition between the old and new as well as flags up a societal shift in Irish culture.

Extract 18

1. Father Quinn: Mrs. Brown - have THEY called here? Have they?
2. Agnes: Who? Have who called?
3. Father Quinn: The Missionaries, from the Church of Latter Day Saints.
4. Agnes: Nobody's called here Father.
5. Father Quinn: You know - they have converted four families in the last six months.
6. Agnes: Well wait a minute Father - these Missionaries – do they believe in God?
7. Father Quinn: Well - Yes.
8. Agnes: Well then what's the problem? We're all on the same bus, who gives a shite who the driver is!
9. Father Quinn: I give a shite!
10. Agnes: Father you watch your fuckin' language in this house!
- FATHER QUINN IS SORRY
11. Agnes: Now Father look – what you need to do, you need to get into your car – and drive home! Father, these things are sent to test us.
12. FATHER QUINN NOW BECOMES VERY DRAMATIC FATHER QUINN:
(TURNING BACK) You think so?
13. Agnes: Oh, yes! SHE LEADS HIM TO THE FRONT DOOR AND OPENS IT
14. Agnes: Come on. Now look - Father, what you need to do is – well, just keep the faith ...
15. Father Quinn: (MUTTERING TO HIMSELF CRAZILY) The Faith! – the faith! – yes the faith! ...

5 Conclusion

In this study we have examined the construction of *the Irish Mammy* stereotype in Mrs Brown's Boy. Throughout the analysis, we found that the representation of the archetype of *the Irish Mammy* is informed by a duality of sorts and involves making and breaking the stereotype, by accessing and playing on shared knowledge and the traditional assumptions and values which exist around the construct. By analysing the most salient themes, we unveiled the manner in which the writers construct the stereotype by exaggerating and emphasising characteristics/traits which have been historically associated with *the Irish Mammy* such as her role as a loving parent, a homemaker and her lack of control when it comes to abstaining from interfering or trying to regulate her children's lives. Together with this, we found that her portrayal as uneducated as well as her lack of cultural knowledge, regarding sexual matters and technological developments, reinforces the stereotype as this draws from the

assumption of a sheltered outlook on the world from a domain within the home that was the main social space associated with this construct. In the same vein, her discomfort with physical demonstrations of affection and letting her barriers down reflect insights into the world she once belonged to. Therefore, on the one hand, our analysis has shown that by drawing on such traits, the writers command the recognition of audiences (not necessarily only Irish audiences) through conformity to 'cultural verisimilitude', that is, what the dominant culture believes to be the case with regard to mores, norms and shared common knowledge (Hall 1997). On the other hand, the analysis has revealed that 'Mrs Brown's Boys' also challenges 'cultural verisimilitude' by breaking away from established traditions by using counter-stereotypes in the portrayal of *the Irish Mammy*. Mrs Brown's character, for instance, is shown to be brash, defensive, confrontational, crude and outspoken, all traits which serve, for a number of reasons, to deconstruct the traditional identity of *the Irish Mammy*. This study highlights that the inclusion of counter-stereotypic examples, such as these, which form part of the deconstruction, does not attempt to disconfirm and render the cultural stereotype obsolete (Hewstone 1989), as is often common in television where there are counter-stereotypes such as a black President or a working mother, but instead, in 'Mrs Brown's Boys', serves to mark, emphasise, acknowledge and challenge the traditional stereotype within this particular sociocultural context. The deconstruction of the Irish maternal figure, which includes her acceptance of homosexuality, her sexually liberated nature, her desire to be a leader, her feistiness and outspoken personality as well as her blatant lack of respect for Catholicism, has been found in this study to challenge the cultural meanings which exist around the stereotype (Carter and Steiner 2004) by presenting a character who challenges the traditional stereotype. Therefore, while Mrs Brown is unveiled as a product of her old sociocultural background, at the same time, she is also

clearly being shaped and influenced by her new social and cultural milieu. We see an intersectional character whose role, social background, standing, class, age, etc all combine to provide a nuanced version of *the Irish Mammy* which challenges the purist and more simple stereotype which is usually portrayed in Irish fiction (McCarthy 2004: 97). As a result, we notice the re-generation of a culturally constructed identity, a character who is a partial embodiment of a new era in Irish society and who is adapting to social developments while also remaining culturally identifiable. She is also more than a product of an Irish context as she embodies aspects of ‘the institution of motherhood’ (Rich 1976) which means that she is the product of a trans-historical, trans-cultural social phenomenon which explains her success in reaching and appealing to audiences in the UK, Canada, US and Australia. Finally, we see her multi-faceted identity, which is being played out at the interchange of the fiction and social world, as imbued with sociocultural meanings and values, from the past and present, all of which provide a commentary on the sociocultural context the character occupies and serve as a barometer of sociocultural transformation and change.

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Tables

Table 1 Top keywords in Mrs Brown's Boys (MBBC)

N	Top 10 Keywords in MBBC	Freq.	N	Top 10 Keywords <i>without</i> characters and stage directions in MBBC	Freq.
1	AGNES	1657	1	MAMMY	171
2	CATHY	520	2	MRS	134
3	DERMOT	458	3	KITCHEN	133
4	WINNIE	341	4	FECKIN	125
5	BUSTER	192	5	YEH	81
6	MARIA	193	6	CUPBOARD	46
7	GRANDAD	163	7	LOVE	93
8	RORY	169	8	BOOKIN	26
9	BROWN	172	9	SON	45
10	QUINN	133	10	WEDDING	46

Table 2: Frequencies of occurrence across data of the words *mammy*, *mother* and *ma*

N	Keyword	Freq.
1	MAMMY	159
2	MOTHER	26
3	MA	25
4	MAMMA	1
5	MUM	1
6	MUMMY	1
TOTAL		213

Figures

bookin' rent. Cathy: Alright	Mammy	but please don't interfere. Agnes: Fly
to a thug like that. Cathy: Oh	Mammy	if you had your way I'd never get a man
THEN RETURNS Rory: Oh	Mammy	I knew you'd take it hard but please try
Cathy: (trying to be tactful)	Mammy	you should give the hen party a miss. It
her! Dermot: She's very posh	Mammy	Agnes: And so are we. We have a serie
Cathy: Will you stop it,	Mammy	- not all men are sex maniacs! Agnes
FOR IT. AGNES: Go on....	Mammy	...change it... you taught me that
but football isn't one of them.	Mammy	you never listen to me! RORY GOES
SMILES Dermot: Thanks	Mammy	Agnes FILLS UP: It only feels like yest
: It's always difficult for a	mother	when another one leaves the nest. But th
that I will ALWAYS be your	mother.	RORY SMILES Agnes: And I want yo
HILLARY INTO KITCHEN	Agnes:	She's wearing fuckin' silver. She must
	Agnes:	Dermot - what's a blow job?

Figure 1 Concordance lines for *Mammy*, *Mother* and *Agnes*

: I think I'm dying!	Agnes:	Yeh? Well, call me when you're sure
me at my funeral?	Agnes:	Yes. If they both turn up! DERMOT
to examine Grandad.	Agnes:	You're wasting your time with him...he's fucke
Grandad looks great	Agnes:	Doesn't he. I'm telling yeh mahogany is HIS co
: You hated him.	Agnes:	Ah, he was a shit, nobody liked him! Ah,
he'd be electrocuted.	Agnes:	And she wonders why she can't get a man
ockings at a funeral?	Agnes:	Will you shut the fuck up?
Fr QUINN: I know!	Agnes:	How do you fuckin' know?

Figure 2 Concordance lines for *Agnes* showing her non-traditional side

Dermot and Maria? Cathy:	Mammy	it's best if we all just all butt out and let
-It-Back-Up Again' Cathy:	Mammy	of ALL people you stay out of this. I m
AGNES: Exactly! Dermot:	Mammy	I wish you'd stay out of things for once
, it's just...to be honest	Mammy	I'd rather not talk about it right now.
bookin' rent. Cathy: Alright	Mammy	but please don't interfere.
Dermot and Maria. Cathy:	Mammy	as I said, we all need to just butt out.
IS LOSING IT. Cathy:	Mammy	is this you not interfering? Agnes: No
that. CATHY SNAPS. Cathy:	Mammy	please! Agnes: I'm only trying to help yo
to a thug like that. Cathy: Oh	Mammy	if you had your way I'd never get a man
....so what happened? Dermot:	Mammy	I'm not talking about it

Figure 3 Concordance lines for *Mammy* showing control and interference

